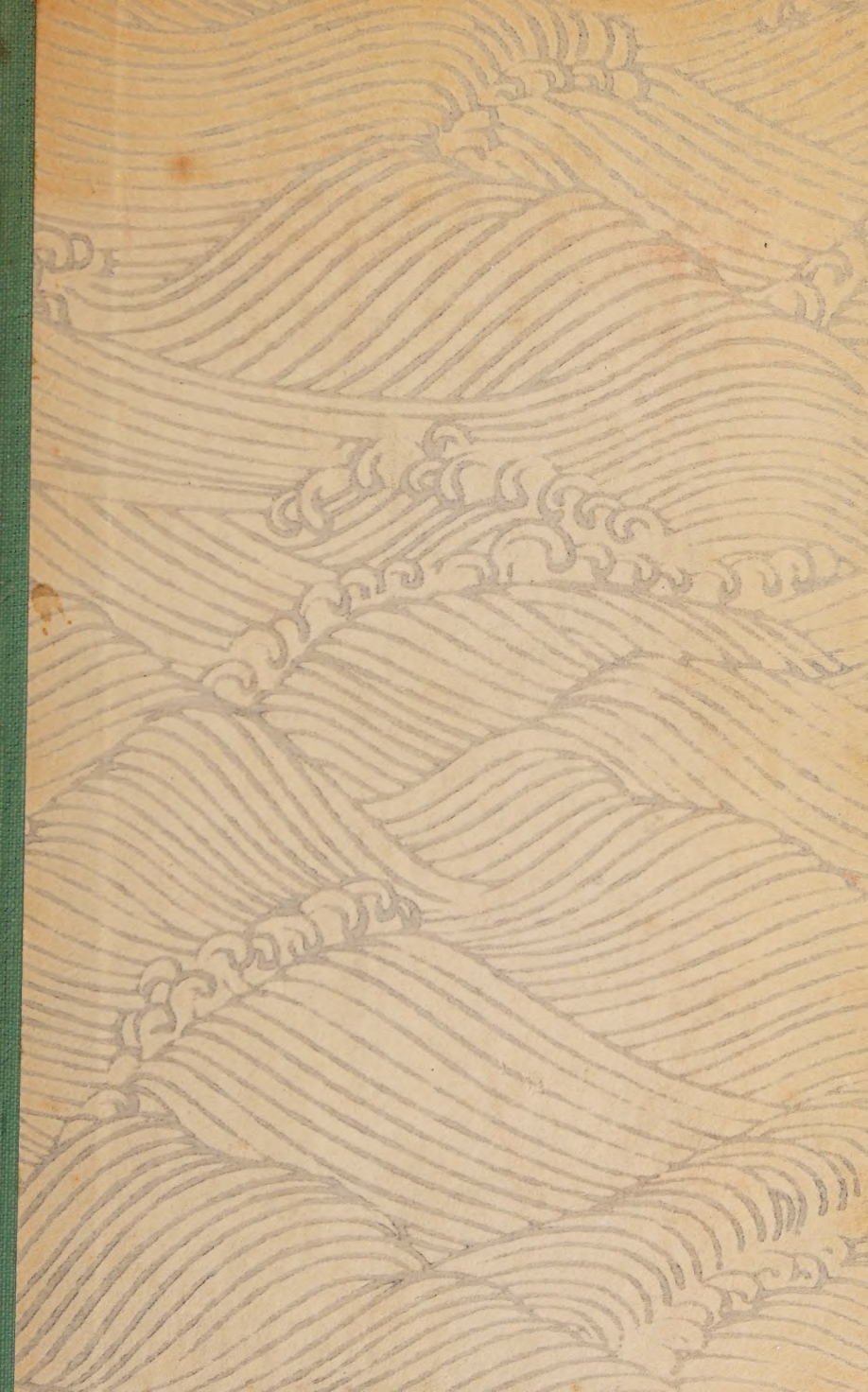






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Winifred Wells.

To my friend Eleanor,

By my friend Winifred,

From Eleanor's friend Helene,

on our friend Alice's birthday

10 April 1933

New York City

THIS DELICATE LOVE

Also by

WINIFRED WELLES

THE HESITANT HEART

Poems, 1919

*This
Delicate
Love*

BY

WINIFRED WELLES



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ACTUAL WILLOW

ACTUAL WILLOW

Once when I looked at willows, I would say,

“Thin-fingered women are underneath that hair!”

Or at the close of a quieter day,

A flock of great birds would seem standing there

On single legs, heads tucked in for the night

Under grey-green plumage—

“Willow, willow is the note,

If roots turn claws, and boughs go up in flight,”

Or, “A river-woman with a long white throat

Will come if I call ‘Willow.’”

So I would say

When I looked at willows once—but today

The actual willow, the fact of a tree,

Is fanciful and beautiful enough for me.

HUNTING DOGS

No other animal, not horse nor bull,
Could be more noble or more beautiful
Than these, who are more courteous than people,
Whose heads are higher and whose bodies ripple
More silkily than any of their kind.
No other dogs so tensely take the wind
As these, who stretch their long necks on the air
As if on water; so weedily the hair
Fringes each tail, floats from each delicate limb,
So hard they stare and breathe, they seem to swim.
And, swiftness softened, muscles at their ease,
When one of them with gentle hope to please
Trots quaintly up, and with a humorous face,
Drops in my hands the velvet of his face,
The petals of his ears and tongue, I lack
All hateful thoughts. Surely the howling pack
Is not of these, surely no terrible trouble
Was ever sought for wild things in the stubble
By eyes so tender, never through such soft breath
Flashed, like man's steel, the savage teeth of death.

THE HEART OF LIGHT

Once, on a cliff, I saw perfection happen.
The full, gold moon was balanced on the sea
Just as the red sun rested on the moor.
The summer evening ripened and fell open;
And people walking through that fruit's rich core
Were suddenly what they were meant to be,
Quiet and happy, softly moving, lovely,
With still, translucent faces and clear eyes,
And all their heads and bodies brightly rimmed
With delicate gold. So radiantly, so gravely,
These people walked, so crowned, so golden-limbed,
The cliff seemed like an edge of Paradise.

DEFENSE OF DESOLATION

Patiently poverty will tarnish
This old house if it is left alone;
If riches' brushes, suave with varnish,
Will somehow miss this moss, and the cracked stone,
Through which the green grass bursts, can but be saved
From those glib tools so keen to bevel,
Block and glaze, so sharp to plane all waved
And beautiful unevenness, to level
Alders into hedges and gentians to a lawn.
May those who ruin with repair be drawn
Down other roads; here let old metals
Rust like the sumach, let this sodden crust
Of torn, rain-honeyed eaves green over with the petals
Of the roof-flowers' slow rosettes, and through this dust
Loose many-footed mildew's tufted tread.
What though the living leave it? How the dead
Will love the grey and silver skeleton
Of their once golden house! And, terrifying none,
Return to whisper, till the beams and slanting posts,
As boughs with lilacs, blossom with their small, white
ghosts.

D E A T H

That's only an Arabian word
For desert travelling,
No unreality has occurred,
Their absence is a simple thing.

That's only Gaelic for away
On islands to the west,
And their intent is not to stay,
Only to linger and to rest.

Let no one speak to me a tongue
That I shall never learn,
And though they went when I was young,
Before I'm old they will return.

C O N S E C R A T I O N

I give my body for a willow wand,
I give my heart to hold it high forever
Over each brittle pool and oily pond.
I promise to be tall, I promise never
To bend to earth—save as the strange divining rod
That only curves for the secret steel
Of clearest water, so I too shall feel
No other magnet but my hidden god.

PROUD SHANTIES

Shanties silvering themselves along the beaches,

Like heaps of old shells that the tide washes in,
The rubbing of the sea-grass and the sea-gulls' screeches
And the sound of the sea have worn them thin.

Shanties are sure that they are shells when sunset-tinted,

Or filmed by fog in an opalescent swirl—
And by moonlight, when every grain of sand is glinted,
It's plain that they feel capable of pearl.

FEAST IN THE FOREST

Fine lace that water-spiders spin,
Frail water-lily porcelain,
Small leaves of watercress spread out
To hold the coral flesh of trout;
The beaded globes of blackberries,
The mushroom's fluted delicacies—
But first she chose a dark pool for her table's
 Polished oval, there to spread this feast
 Of all the forest's daintiest,
The colored food of dreams and fables.

The single guest crouched down to eat;
His hands were exquisite, his feet
Hid deep in fern, a pointed lock
Sprang from each brow, he seemed to mock
A harsh mouth with a honeyed tongue,
His eyes were old, his eyelids young.
Gently he weighed between a thumb and finger
 Each crumb of her fastidious bread,
 Each heart-shaped drop of wine, and said
He had no thirst, he felt no hunger.

While in each water-lily cup
The flushed and fragrant dew dried up,
He smiled his slanting smile and told
Of other feasts; while the green mould
Mottled the straight, immaculate roots,
The innocent lustre of the fruits,
Lightly he leaned to her, his small eyes glistened,
 He said he had not been averse
 In other forests unlike hers.
She, quiet, sat and piteously listened.

H A R V E S T D U S T

The road is burnt to dust, like more dust meadow rue
Smokes in the meadow; berries are balanced to fall
At a cowbell's echo; apples will soon be over and nothing
left to do
For the trees but to crook their elbows on the wall.

In the farmhouse doorway a woman, husking corn,
Droops to where softer than children's hair, a yellow heap
Of the silk fondles her hand; under her eyes her face is as
worn
As the stone steps where she sits and has fallen asleep.

What is it all for? Why must the earth crack
Over and over beneath this searing breath?
Only that apples be embers and berries black,
And women content and wearied unto death.

THUNDERSTORM

Swift and terribly rootless form
The purple forests of a storm.
From brassy boughs each furious flower
Puffs leaden pollen in a shower.

No refuge, even for the good,
Is underneath this wicked wood—
Even tall men in stony places
Lift up but small, white violet faces.

HERD - GIRL

You are the herd-girl who has lost her herd.
Now can the river grass, unrumped,
Shade the river, and, uncrumpled,
The perfect flower lift up the unruffled bird.

Now you are free. Your wistful beasts are gone.
Gone the great, golden eyes, the wrinkles
Of golden brows, and the silvery tinkles
Under the roving throats. You are alone.

And you are free. Now at the close of day
No pensive creatures wait, none call, none need you,
The herd, run far afield, have freed you,
Lie down and rest you on the sweet, stacked hay.

You are alone, may all your care now be
For your own thirsts, for your own hungers,
The tender pity of your fingers
Fall on your own full breast, for you are free.

W I N T E R A P P L E S

Not in a valley ivoried with grain,

Where wheat is stacked in golden fountain-shapes,
Nor in some vineyard when an opal rain
Chips off the amethyst and amber grapes.

But in that orchard on its hill of stones,

Where, rustily, the heavy leaves are pinned
To hollow stems, and, worn to creaking bones,
Boughs are like fingers scratching on the wind.

Here, less a woman than a moon-eyed witch,

In this most bitter place for fruit Love stands
Stooping where apples turn the black frost rich,
To lift one like a lantern in her hands.

CLOTH OF GOLD

Ferries never go to sea like the steamers

That are frilled with soft smoke, that curtsey to the town,
And turn towards Spain with a stir of lacy streamers—

For all of that a ferry cracked and brown
And wistful as an old shoe, though it only scuttles

Over a steel river worn to rusty red,
Is the same as any steamer if you say that both are shuttles
On one enormous loom but with different lengths of
thread.

Steamers' wakes are fine-spun silk, moon-spotted

And sun-striped, unrolling over spools of clear blue glass;
And ferries' tracks, as coarse as hemp and clotted

With the grit of minutes, jerk through tarnished brass.
This is a heavy cloth they weave with horror, pity,

Tenderness and courage in every sagging seam—
Yet in the dusk it falls across a tired city

In plaids of gold and silver, lighter than a dream.

A SOUND LIKE LAUGHTER

Not though you have the hot god's angry pace,
Not though I lose myself to win this race,
Shall you catch hold my hair and turn my face,
And twist me to your treacherous embrace.

There is another god on earth and he
Has snatched my outstretched, desperate hand—Ah, see
How I am gone! The green and rippling tree
Closes like water ever over me.

What violent vanishing was here none knows;
But here, in blessed radiance, now grows
A tree, in whom roots hold, boughs rise, sap flows—
A woman's body bears no more than those.

B O Y

Will no one see that in your wood
The season is not spring but winter?
You are too proud to wear a hood,
You love to drive a crystal splinter
Through your bare hands, your naked feet.
White nuts, snow berries you will eat
If wild birds bring them, on your tongue
The taste of ice is piercing sweet.
Will no one say that being young
Is being hurt, is being bled,
Enduring dagger-thirsts, wolf-hungers,
Is being self-raised from the dead
More times than boys have toes and fingers?

Does no one know the unicorn
Kneels down to you as to your sister?
If, with his single cryptic horn,
He has crept close and sharply kissed her,
He is no less your animal—
He will run with you till befall
Your freshet, flower and furrowed mould.

Will no one say that growing tall
Is crouching down and feeling cold
Outside dark windows starred with frost?
That being innocent is only
Being locked out, alone and lost,
White as the snow, as still, as lonely?

M O T H

The face is tiny, subtle, peakèd,
The tilted eyebrows faintly mark
A shape like wings; the eyes are wicked.
She flutters flattened on the dark,
And ominously the flame's reflection
On wrist and throat and brow is cast—
A danger lies in each direction,
Nor fire, nor she will let me past.

INDIAN PIPES

These are the flowers for a mad bride—
At dusk, on the black earth, under black trees,
She shall fill her torn white hands with these.
She shall be heard by all the countryside,
When she comes singing to the woods' edge.
Whiter than dogwood shall flutter on the ledge
The silver tatters of her bridal dress.
Singing in a cracked voice a song of craziness,
Down the vague meadow, where her floating veil
Rests on the mist, she shall wander till her wail
Dies along the river in the mown hay.
There they shall find her at break of day,
With eyes like the first white frost, with the tips
Of her tired fingers and the droop of her lips
Blackened like the flowers in her dead bouquet,
The flowers that were all one waxen white,
Leaf, stem and cup, but could not last the night.

O R C H A R D S

An orchard in the valley,
An orchard on the hill,
One is fulsome yet with bloom
For winds to dance at will,
One is forlorn and still.

The apple trees were prudent
And calm of bud and root,
For it's the careful flower,
The cool, reluctant shoot,
That come to certain fruit.

Nearer to sky the peach trees,
Breathless, every one,
Lifted high pink petals
On tiptoe for a run
Tingling in the sun.

Open-eyed and innocent
Their tenderness was tossed
All in a loving impulse

For a rose kiss and lost
Hideously in frost.

Say what you will for beauty
That takes all spring to tell
How white it is—brief blossoms,
Aflame before they fell,
Were beautiful as well.

W I N T E R ' S H E R C O U N T R Y

Winter's her country, always in her heart
There is a finger pointing to the north.
Forever and forever she sets forth
From ample reaping and full-laden cart.
In golden summer haze her blue eyes smart
For high, keen air, her thin hands take no worth
From the rich stains of ripening dark earth.
Her blood is poisoned with a crystal dart.
Her feet are meant to thrust in narrow skis,
Up a long silver slope forever going
Far and away from all green boundaries
Into a globe of pearl where it is snowing;
Into a grotto cut from delicate trees,
Whose fruit is light, and where no wind is blowing.

EXILE

I have made grief a gorgeous, queenly thing,
And worn my melancholy with an air.
My tears were big as stars to deck my hair,
My silence stunning as a sapphire ring.
Oh, more than any light the dark could fling
A glamour over me to make me rare,
Better than any color I could wear
The pearly tissue that the shadows bring.
What is there left to joy for such as I?
What throne can dawn upraise for me who found
The dusk so royal and so rich a one?
Laughter will whirl and whistle on the sky,
Far from his riot I shall stand uncrowned,
Disrobed, bereft, an outcast in the sun.

WITCH'S RETURN TO EARTH

No! No! Not with God's goodness any more.
Snapping my harp strings and the flaxen ties
That bound me to the wings of Paradise,
Leaving all Heaven and its soft uproar,
Beating upon each rose-enamelled door,
See one, who from God's perfect and God's wise,
His angels and his apples, rudely flies,
Ripping like lightning down the quilted floor!

Where is that snake of Eve's? Set me astride
His iridescence, streaking back to earth,
Toads on my shoulders, the sardonic mirth
Of herons flapping near me, and so glide
To steely twilight in some autumn marsh,
Where God is witty and grotesque and harsh.

HARLEQUIN, CRUCIFIED

The martyrs carry carven oak,
On ivory the saints recline.
The clown hangs high and still; he broke
His body on a different sign.

His thin palms hold the scorching nails
As lightly as red beads, rosettes
Are ravelling where each foot pales
To point in final pirouettes.

Light blazes through his hollow eyes—
No rosary of tears shall mar,
No cross deform this boy who dies
Stretched out upon his star.

TULIPS WERE MEANT FOR AUTUMN

Tulips were meant for autumn, not for spring.
More like rich fruits than delicate flowers, they seem
Unseasonably mature; less tremulous dream
Than stately reverie, less a bird's wing
Than a bird's breast is in their blossoming.
While slenderness shoots up by every stream,
And woods are whitely starred, the gardens gleam
With ampler colors that the tulips bring.

Spring is the season full of frail unease,
When angry girls some dagger's edge must find
On every leaf. Tulips are not for these.
Superb, hard helmets, sombrely designed,
They are for women, who beneath still trees
Stand guard with quiet heart and brooding mind.

B U S Y F L A M E

O Child, with what a will
You keep from being still!
How bonelessly you bend,
How tensely reascend!
Those fingers stretch, these fingers close,
One hand a starfish, one a rose.

My head is in a whirl
To see each antic curl
On yours point up and prance
An individual dance—
Wistful I watch and never tire,
Still as a dog before a fire.

A CHILD, WHO STARED AT
A CLOCK

Look on the face of Time, old, blind and bland,
Remark his cautious pulse that never quickens,
Behold one bustling, one quiescent hand.
Of his most virtuous voice that never thickens
In the night, nor naps at noon, oh, Little One,
Be deferent to the tone! Hark how precisely
He strikes you out of sleep, and "Day is done,"
He warns, and "Bread is baked," announces nicely.
Encircled in his twelve banalities
Round out your rut of days, live safe, die cozy.
His petulant minutes serve, his calm hours please;
His grey-eyed workman, but his wastrel, rosy,
Roofless, smiling, insolent, never be,
Lest you lose Time and find Eternity.

A CHILD'S DRAWING OF A
COBWEB

By this, at last, I know I am your mother.

More than the texture of your hair,

More than the similar blue stare

Of eyes as round as mine, this proves no other

Could be the root that nourished your small petals.

Your mind was not intent to trace

A cartwheel or a clock's clear face,

Not woods' hard surfaces nor gleaming metals.

Close to the blank grey paper you attended,

The busy spider of your hand

Scuttled and schemed and squirmed and planned,

Till, from the crayon's golden stub, descended

The faint, familiar delicate line—

So do you sign yourself as mine,

Most strangely with your own hand you do homage

To what I am and love and serve,

The silvery vein, the fine-spun nerve,

The silken bone of some frail beauty's image.

B R O W N B R E A D

The long white fast is ended; the dark house
Abruptly brightens; on a dampened sill
Now I can lean an idle arm and drowse,
And turn my winter-whittled hand and fill
The finger bones with light, and watch each one
Put on its full rose flesh against the sun.

Now for each ravenous and rocky cave
On cheek and throat, and for that leafless wood
Of rigid branches in my veins I crave
Only the old, indelicate, lavish food,
That air curls in crisp wafers, and lets fall
Upon the hunger of long burial.

Quietly warming in this window now,
I smell the loam, I hear the plougher's voice,
I see the field's crust falling from his plough—
The knife to cut my loaf is that tall boy's;
The brown bread steams and crumbles at his feet,
And seeds and roots and stems and I can eat.

MY HANDS, THIS SPRING

Touch treetops, if you will, stroke the bright wing
That slants against a scalloped cloud.
Race up the rocky slope, be shrill, be proud;
This is my humble year,
I want the bent roots near,
I lay my hands upon old leaves this spring.
I stoop to feel the new life shuddering
Against this body of the old,
I kneel to wait until the warming mould
Moves softly, where a frond,
Tight-curled and snub and blonde,
Nudges and presses silently towards spring.

THE EDGE OF THE WILDERNESS

I went to the edge of the wilderness
Over and over again; I took from that cave
The green light full in my eyes, under that wave,
That never quite broke, I stood my ground
On the safe shorn field, never quite drowned,
Though the goldenrod foamed in my face, though I put
One arm in up to the shoulder, and dipped my foot
Into blue shadow, but always my heart would turn back,
My heart would remember the wistful track
Of a wheel in a road, my heart would recall
The hood on a haystack, the stones in a wall—
Again and again the heart would recover
The lonely mind, that over and over
Went down to the edge of the wilderness.

SILVER FOR MIDAS

SILVER FOR MIDAS

Some day, Midas, the daffodils
Will jangle out of tune,
You will come down from your brassy hills
Sick and tired of the noon.

To my silver house of birch bark
You will come down, not asking much,
But feeling through the still dark
For the things I love to touch.

My cobweb bells that bead the lawn,
That ring more tinily than tears
Beneath my silver-stepping fawn
With his pussywillow ears;

My squirrel with his tail curved up
Like half a silver lyre,
My glassy flowers with stem and cup
Glazed in a silver fire.

You shall kneel to the star in my pool,
There your hot cheeks shall be lost,
Your yellow head rise up as cool
As an aster dipped in frost.

You shall stand in a moonlit place
As still as sculpture stands,
A look of wonder on your face
Laid there by my silver hands.

THIS DELICATE LOVE

This delicate love of mine is nothing rare—

Its fragile, angular graces

All simple, delicate grasses share,

That live in crowds in common places.

All homely fields are full of what I give!

The frailest fibres of my longing,

Silken and fine and sensitive,

Through the broad clods go thronging.

Compared to love like mine the durable rose

Of a vivid love should last like leather,

The lily-bud's coarse crotch enclose

A cream kept sweet in any weather.

Unsafe for stores, too flimsy for a flame,

This love yet thirsts and thrives—and passes,

This usual love, so exquisitely the same

As one clear stem amid a blur of grasses.

S U B T L E S N O W

You are like snow, I think—
Not snow that catches fire and crackles,
Or snaps whole trees in, link by link,
Till twigs can't turn without the clink
Of little iridescent shackles—

That hurts, that keeps awake.
This is soft snow, white lashes tangling
Over shut eyes, each gentle flake
A light, light finger that will make,
In time, the heavy hand for strangling.

No cries for help will sound
In snow like this, but deeper, deeper
Smother, not even faintly found
Shall be white breath, a white mound
All that remains to mark the sleeper.

D W E L L I N G

I can never make you the perfect home

That the bee builds in her many-roomed honeycomb,
With its gold glass cupboards and its ivory floors,
And its immaculate, softly closed doors.

Nor would I ever paper the white hut

Of a windowless cocoon to keep you shut
Breathless from the world, so entombed in me,
That you would sleep away your own identity.

But from the cobweb-carpenters your spouse

Selects her gentle tools, though building you a house
Seems such an exquisitely dangerous thing,
There is no plan beyond this silken scaffolding.

DESIGN FOR A SHROUD

I promise that, in death,
I shall float out as lost
As though I rode my breath
Upon the midnight frost.

Oh, cold and small and still,
My angel host will be,
As if, across the sill,
A bird had come for me.

Though hanging in the snow
His trumpet made of glass,
You will not hear him blow,
You will not see me pass.

But on the pane his claw
With crystal in its tip,
Precise and clear will draw
The map of my white trip.

B U B B L E

Not even a fairy's child, for whom it is no trouble
To carve a pipe's bowl from a yellow rose,
Could ever have blown a more delicate bubble
Than this one our fingers so fearfully enclose.

Still and silver and beautiful, it drifted
Into our hands of its own will—
Now your life and my life are clasped and lifted
In one clear beauty, silver-still.

And my hands cry to your hands, "Oh, touch it lightly!"
And yours to mine, "But hold it long!"
To keep it close like this, burning like this so brightly,
Oh, strength be gentle, and gentleness be strong.

W A T E R F A L L

You are the silver-bodied waterfall
That comes between the world and me—
For all that anyone can see
I might be mist against a wall,
Caught to your heart, housed safe in you,
But oh, Belovéd, in what danger too!

THE DRIFTWOOD HARP

THE DRIFTWOOD HARP

It was a peaceful world we knew,
Small as a green bowl under the blue,
Filmy circle of five hills—

We had

Little wisdom to make us sad.
Dreams fared no further than the rim
Of the horizon and there grew dim
With day, and their fire would slide
Back into dark on the home side.

Save for the shudder a lizard breeze
Drew now and then from tall palm trees,
All life and all leafage dreamed.
Deep in the ferns the houses gleamed
With sleepy, tousled roofs and seemed
Less like graceless shelters and more
The backgrounds for each open door,
Where groping babes grew brown as roots,
And old men, nodding, dried like fruits,
And women yawned in the still sun
Over bright weaving that never was done.

In that little land of great content,
No one hour struck, no high event
Clattered or billowed along the way
Tomorrow took from yesterday.
Dawn slanted into the same twilight
Over and over. . . .

There was no white,
Wonderful weariness to keep
Men from their usual, gradual sleep;
No loneliness, no smiting mood,
Nor any hunger, save for food.

Now here I grew, and here grew
My strange driftwood harp too,
Shaped like a fanciful, flying wing,
Of dark wood and bright string,
A beautiful though battered thing,
That never the softest breath stirred,
But through its gold bones still was heard
The sorrow of a great lost bird.

And when I played it I would kneel,
For when I touched it I could feel
Under my hands the sting and start
Of a living, terribly bleeding heart.

There was a mystery in my song,
Its trouble and beauty did not belong
To anything that I had seen.
There were no words for the near, green
Snarled reality under my eyes,
No monotone for those smooth skies;
But rhythm out of the harp would be
Sucked up and broken over me;
And drenched and breathlessly my cries
Up from the fragments would arise
In love of a longing I named the sea!

But none who heard me understood
Nor seemed to find my singing good.
They told me only a mad fool
Could conjure 'up this crinkled, cool,
Level mirage and claim it true,
When anyone could see that blue
Was taut and brazen like the sky,
Or a hill, immovable and high;
While water certainly stood sweet
And green in circles before the feet,
Or narrowed from rocks in white strips.
And as for whims like shells or ships—
They turned away and curled their lips!

Who would have dreamed that the king's son
Would be the first enkindled one
To listen and long, and wave his hand?
To turn his face from his father's land?
And youth and youth flamed after him
To the dark height and over its rim,
Like star after vanishing star,
Till they wore a path as white as a scar!

Oh, long and long the old men yearned,
But the young men never returned—
So they cut off my hands and tongue and burned
My harp. The tall, straight strings
Ravelled and shrivelled to thin black rings,
And the multi-colored skeins of fire,
That twisted up from the grey pyre,
Were the stained swords that put out my sight
Forever—

I had no light
For the king's son when he came home,
But his stinging words were a glitter of foam
On my bleak silence, his swift wrath
Sped in a golden, arrowy path
Over my waste—

And what I had grieved
And gladdened and died for they all believed
At last.

When the king's son was through
Giving the truth to my dreams, he drew
From his silver robe a carved, blue
Vessel of water, that those who still
Were in doubt, could sip to their fill.
Mists of song I had spread for their drouth,
But a little bitter taste in the mouth
Was their first drink of faith.

They sighed
Over the dust of my harp and tried
To find the strings, but the king's son cried
For my own wounds, and carried me
Over the hill to the healing sea.

S I L V E R F O G

Hush—hush—hush—

Steady as footsteps in the sand,
I hear two other oars crunch in their locks;
And look, now, how my boat rocks
To feel another boat close by,
So close, so close, that if I reach my hand . . .
Who are you, who am I
To halt each other with a cry?
Let us continue blurred and lonely,
Touched by each other's trembling only,
It is so seldom two can be
Each for each a mystery.

H A M M E R E D O U T O F M I S T

Lest earth too long resemble the white moon
Because of mist, something will happen soon
To strike its ivory shell and break it in,
High on that curve where it has silvered thin.
And at the opening shall be set to pry
Some hot and inescapable blue eye.
Then, in this surf, where the sharp edge of sound
Crumbles across her ankles, shall be found,
Milky amid the glistening chips, a pearl,
Carved in the likeness of a listening girl.

W A V E

I saw you coming and I was afraid!
I knew you for the wave whose livid crests
Dishevel over brows as hard as jade.
Foam, like a flush, paled down the sallow sands—
But still I set the pebbles of my breasts
Against the sea, and clenched my shells of hands.

Oh, what had I of growth that could avail
Before such height? My strength went out like smoke
Beneath such weight. What could my heart but fail,
To feel the great curve pressing back my bones
As limp as kelp, to hear them as they broke
In soft hysteria among the stones.

BLUE POOL

Heart-downward on a burning stone
Beside the pool I lay alone.
On the blue edge I set my chin
To watch the girl I had pushed in,
To see her glimmer as she fell,
Paler and paler, a star-shaped shell
With outstretched limbs and floating hair—
Deep down she slowly turned to stare;
As if to say that she was drowned,
Her white lips moved but made no sound.
Driftingly then she seemed to pass
Drawn like a smoke across a glass—
And fishermen, rowing home from sea,
Muffled their oars lest they waken me,
And climbed the dune with tiptoe tread,
Just as though I were not dead.

R O S E M A R Y, R O S E M A R Y

You are good for bruised lips, so they say,
Rosemary, rosemary, ghost of a flower,
Evanescent as yesterday's spray,
So tearful, so tiny, fading away
Into the moor like the breath of a shower,
You are good for bruised lips, so they say.

Softer than fragrance, less than mist,
Sometime, healingly you shall be pressed
Here on this hurt which is my breast,
Here on my mouth, where I was kissed,
Memory, memory, you shall rest,
Softer than fragrance, less than mist.

M O O R

Thin landlord of a scattering estate,
The sea's soil is the one I understand.
There is in me no steamy loam of land
Compacted for one purpose—love or hate,
But particles that will not integrate,
That slip, minute Saharas, from the hand,
Grained to disperse, in such uneasy sand,
My mind confronts its own most colorless trait.

Few are the vagabonds whose grey shoes bless
My blurred roads leading nowhere—save the sea—
Yet in my weedy shade those few will stay
Whole summers long, and take deep breaths of me
As if to drink my thirst, and carry away
Sweet-smelling armfuls of my dreariness.

C L I F F S

I took my longing up a cliff,
All alone I looked on the sea—
The surf, spread out like fans of lace,
Rustled a soft sound up to me,
A gentle sound, like sliding beads,
And wind hummed over the weeds.

Long and long ago a cliff
Lovers out of luck would leap,
And fall to cool their hearts like stones,
Or break, like waves, and fall asleep.
The sea, now, is the same, I knew,
And any cliff, I thought, would do.

I laid down my frock and frills,
I took the gold pins from my hair,
And tiptoed to the tasselled edge,
Whispering a pensive prayer,
That nothing else of me but foam
Should remain to carry home.

I was a curve of flame in the air!
I was a coal that scorched the sea!
The spray went up in a steamy cloud,
High and hissing over me—
And my body slid out of the blue
Polished and cold and new.

I shook the bitterness from my eyes!
I laughed that I was alive!
So now I know I can dare to love
As long as I love to dive.
And I am not the one to weep,
While there are cliffs to leap.

H I G H T I D E

High on my hill I watch the tide come in,
Laying its blue tiles in a broken tomb
Over the skeletons of sand, over the bones
Of rocks and wharves, wreathing the long graves
With griefless hands and strangely happy voices.
From where I look I can see going under
All ugliness, all death, all that is lost
And drift. Whichever way I turn from here
I can see life and beauty rising, finding,
Taking hold and making safe. The dream comes true!
And all the little promises of pools
Are kept— Inward the tide is surely coming,
Lifting the draggled weeds beneath the shells,
Lifting the shells beneath the anchored boats,
Lifting the boats, inward, even to hills,
Upward, even to me, lifting my hands
Along the sky, setting my hair afloat,
Until my heart swings free, my tears spill over,
And I can bear no more— The tide is high.

FAWNS WITH BLUE EYES

D I A N A

I am always carving arrows
Or polishing my bow,
Yet why I care for hunting
I do not seem to know.

For they are long and lonely,
The ways of wood and hill,
And it is wearisome to seek
And sorrowful to kill.

But I am always hoping
I shall carry home some prize,
Like a white-feathered squirrel
Or a fawn with blue eyes.

CAMELS ON LEXINGTON

Once, even on Lexington Avenue,

 I seemed to hear the still dusk speaking—

 It was a moment when all iron creaking,
All thrumming steel, all men and women too
Had passed. Amazingly down the empty street

 There came two camels, stepping softly,

 Stepping over the stone as deftly

As if it were sand that rustled under their feet.

Gaunt beasts, with their birdlike necks and tall, tufted
 backs,

 Out of a land, where nightfall is full of lovely,

 Wavering horizontals, oh, how gravely

They passed these vertical buildings, between the straight
 steel tracks.

A DOG WHO ATE A
WATER LILY

Tired of being my dog, and with grave anger
That there were only ivory bones to eat,
He left me for the pond, filled with a hunger,
Half-memory, for some immaculate meat
To lay on his bright tongue; I saw him linger,
Fastidiously nose the shimmering heat,
And, as if suddenly grown brisker, younger,
Snap up a lily, living, flushed and sweet.

Like one thin sound the summer, softly muted,
Buzzed in his silky ear; a long, long while
He stood in reeds and godlike trance fast-rooted.
The taste of lotos made him strangely smile—
No more my humble dog, sad-eyed, four-footed,
He was Anubis wading in the Nile.

TROPHIES AND NOSEGAYS

The adjectives are garden words,
 They are the luscious fruits,
The tulips, lilies, with their breasts of birds,
 The pearl and coral roots
Of vegetables, the curly, braided vines
Tipping the cups, dripping the beads of many-colored wines.

And so it is not much
 To have whole pages tendrilled, mossed—
Good taste, a light touch,
 Tactfulness for the strange, the lost,
For planting each, where each most happily lives.
Women are good at growing adjectives.

Not in the lawned and laded town
 Man's sterner muscle curbs,
His harder heart brings down
 The living bodies of the verbs;
But from the crags, the quicksands, he must bring
The fins that flick in a phrase, the hoofs that make a
 sentence ring.

Men who but dare, who will not wait,
Who rush the river, shall lift out,
For all the iridescent bait,
Only the bull-frog, not the trout;
And bawling after antlered beauty scare
Into a timid death only the droll-eared hare.

TO POETS

Let green moss soften your settle,
And white frost fur your bricks,
Let swallows nest in your kettle
And moths sit safe on your wicks.

Lift your two hands toward heaven—
Through the thin roof's threadlike bars,
From the moon's loaf shall be given
The cruel crumbs of stars.

Have no hope of being cheerful,
Never ask for bread,
But live alone and tearful
And eat white stones instead.

TRINKET

(To be worn on the wrist on certain evenings)

Now that it is moonlight, I must be mournful,
Darken my eyes and whiten my face,
Wander by myself with a lonely, lily grace—
And here are lovely tears, a whole silver hornful,
Blow them like beads upon the velvet of this place!

Forget my blue sash and my gallant yellow ruffle,
I am now a statue, I am stone-gowned.
So when you blow that silver, mind how you muffle
The silver sound of blowing, even tears on the ground,
Falling and pooling, must make no sound.

Just for this moonlight, I think that I shall borrow
One shiny grief no greater than a star—
(Someone might be fickle or everyone afar!)
So that I can sit in silence saying, "Sorrow, Sorrow,
My very own Sorrow, how adorable you are!"

S P I T E F U L C U R T S E Y

For that most dainty porcelain attitude
You so admire, your lady is well-gifted—
See her assume the shy, submissive mood,
The flowered skirt is spread, discreetly lifted;
You have the bosom's curve, the apprehensive,
Modest foot, the face demure and pensive.

That's a proud body meant to stand erect,
Some sly facility must make it agile
To droop and dip, be prettily abject,
Sedately humble, and politely fragile—
Beneath those lashes, dropped in soft compliance,
There's space for two whole stars of hot defiance.

A H G A B R I E L —

If it should happen now, if a woman named Mary,
 Bending to the weeds in her rose and rosemary bed,
Should see a flaming shadow fall, should hear a scary
 Whirring in the apple tree above her head.

And rising up should find you, leaning on a lily,
 I think she would not speak at all, she would only stare,
Wondering how a grown man could ever be so silly
 As to have a golden hat and long curled hair.

And when your voice so singingly said, "Mary, Mary,
 I have come to tell you"—she would never understand
Your mission or your message, but feeling very wary,
 Wave you from her garden with imperious hand.

Though, when you left, the sunset would glimmer stronger,
 As feathers from your wings floated tinily clear,
She would only think, "Days are still getting longer,"
 Or, "My, but the fireflies are thick this year!"

I know she would not know an angel from a fairy,
 Or recognize light save in the smoky lamp
She sets to shine for Joseph plodding home to his Mary,
 Or believe that golden Gabriel was not a grey tramp.

U N G E N T L E T H R E A T

Of course I shall grow old, but not with grace.
Since all my life I have been greatly scolded
For my excess of gentleness, no folded,
Delicate hands, no bosom trimmed with lace,
Shall decorate my age, nor will my face
Turn pleasant porcelain most sweetly moulded;
And of the hair, that once was softly golded,
Shall not survive one softlier silvered trace.

I shall be knotted, menacing and grim;
Wigged like a judge, and like a jaguar clawed.
I shall be able with a baleful tongue
And beady eye to slay the heroic young;
And when I point my finger, over-awed,
Even the trees will shake in every limb.

FROM AN OLD, OLD CASTLE

I would lie down and launch my pain,
All fern and lily-laden,
Over the water, like Elaine,
Another deathly maiden—
 (If it were a steady barge,
 And the river not too large.)

I, too, would drift a careless face
Under the doleful willow,
And be content to ease my grace
On a mossy board for pillow—
 (If someone would unbraid my hair,
 And spread my ribbons out with care.)

If Launcelot should shake his head,
And the Queen grieve sedately,
I would rejoice that I was dead,
And rest there, still and stately—
 (If I were only sure they'd be
 Sorry enough at sight of me.)

GOLDEN GHOSTS

(In Japan, it is said, the spirits return at twilight)

The ghosts of golden people come
Glimmering back to earth their home
In the blue dusk; the ghosts of white
Tarry until the actual night
Has risen, like water, black and deep.
Westward, the living wake from sleep
And freeze to feel beside the bed
The frosty breathing of their dead.
But in the darkening orient
It seems a lovable event
For ancestors to leave the grave.
What flesh and blood would not be brave,
What twilit roof would not be blest,
To welcome the translucent guest,
If it were evening when he shone,
Blue air, not black, that he rode on?
If, plain as man, but lovelier
Than any light, your grandfather
Came slanting through the wooden door,

And with no footfalls crossed the floor,
Untrembling, you could bear with him,
For he would come, not angry, grim,
And monstrous from his mouldering,
But mindful of how holy a thing
The end of day on earth can be,
Quiet and tired, like you or me.

THE LAST NIGHT OF WINTER

Whose whips are cracking up the river
Till the long shudder of sound,
Half a sharp cry and half ecstatic shiver,
Clutches through the snow at the still ground?

I cannot sleep, so I will light my candle,
I will lead my shadow down the long stair,
At the far door, where someone tries the handle,
One of us will whisper, "Who goes there?"

Wood will whimper and stone be shaken—
While, locked like a heart, the old house grieves,
Rocking in its sleep and yearning to waken
Warm tears in the silver eaves.

When clouds collapse, when the dark releases
A trickle of stars, this house, at one bound,
Will burst like a bulb and fall to pieces,
Floor and door one dust on the ground.

Let the windows crackle and curl like paper,
The rafters slide and the beams fly,
I shall be off on the end of this taper,
Out through the roof and up through the sky!

Straight as a rocket I shall shoot through the shadow,
All out of breath and blinking I shall land
In a green gown in a green meadow,
A crocus, not a candle in my hand.

